

Sermon Ephesians 1:1-14 (Part 1)

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Introduction:

We are told that the letter is from Paul, an apostle (or commissioned or sent one) of Christ Jesus and not because he wanted to be one but because God had willed it, which should be true of all ministers of God. He is writing to the saints in Ephesus, although some early manuscripts don't have Ephesus so it could well have been a travelling letter written to the saints, the holy ones, as we all should be, in the region around Ephesus. He wishes the saints that the favour and peace of God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ would be with them.

Notice the order in verses 3 to 14. Verses 3 to 6 are about God the Father. Verses 7-13a are about the Lord Jesus, while verses 13b-14 are about the Holy Spirit. This is the normal order that we find the three persons of the Trinity named. We find the same in Matthew 29:19 - *“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”*. It is interesting to note that name is singular in this passage.

How do we handle a passage like this? God chose us. God predestined us. From before the creation of the world. The repetition of He, His, Him. Notice though that Paul views these as blessings. God blesses us with temporal blessings as well, but not everyone is rich, or health, but all Christians have these privileges. We are all blessed in the heavenly realms with these blessings if we are truly Christians.

The first thing I want us to notice is that Paul is more concerned with God and his glory than anything else.

The second thing we need to remember is that Paul is not writing, as one commentary put it, “as a corundum to tease our minds but as a wonder to evoke our praise.” But still we need to take these things seriously and ask ourselves what it means. Paul's predominant thought through out these verses is that God is sovereign and the glory belongs to him. At the end of the day it's about God, not us. This is not just a Pauline doctrine either. We see it in the words of Jesus in John 17 for example – John 17:6 - *“I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They are yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word.”*

The third we need to notice is that Paul is tying in all the blessings we have in Christ with exactly the terminology he is using here. He sees our being chosen, our being predestined as part of our spiritual blessings.

So our central point for this is:

Doctrine: God is sovereign in all things and the glory belongs to him.

So what do we mean by God is sovereign?

The biblical idea of sovereignty involves at least three things:

- Ownership: The universe and everything in it is God's. That include you and I whether we like it or not.
- Authority: God has the absolute right to impose his will on all his creatures. But his commands are never arbitrary but flow from his character which is a great blessing. That



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means he is free to do with us as he pleases and we don't really have a say in the matter. The potter may do with the clay what he likes.

- Control: God controls all things. He might be angry or displeased with universe at times but he is never baffled or frustrated by it.

We see this also in the words of Jesus. In John 15:16 - "*You did not chose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last.*" and in John 10:27,28 - "*My sheep listen to my voice; I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand*".

Two big issues come out of the issue of the sovereignty of God. They are the issue of free will and the issue of suffering. Both are far too large for me to cover here today but here are some pointers to get you thinking about the issue.

But what about free will?

If God is sovereign then why are still responsible for what we do wrong? If God chooses us then why are the unbelievers condemned for not choosing God. Surely then it's God's fault that they don't come to Christ?

For me the clearest explanation is that there is a difference between free will and free choice. We have freedom of choice. Given two choices we are free to choose whichever of the two we like. We are free to choose to help the blind man cross the road or to ignore him. However, the decision that we make is based upon our inclinations, experiences and our inbuilt natures. And that is where the problem comes in. If we take the Bible seriously then we have to take the fact that we are sinners seriously and that our inbuilt natures have been corrupted by sin. So we can still choose to do the good and help the blind man across the road but we no longer do it for the glory of God. We do it for our glory, because it makes us feel good, or because that is what is expected of us, or for any other reason revolving around ourselves and our relationship to the world. But not for God. That is really at the end of the day what sin is all about – not giving the creator the glory that is due to him. And this is why there are good people in the world, people who care about other people or care about the environment, but yet will still go to hell. Not because they are bad, but because in all the good they did they did not give God the glory, they did not honour God. You could view it as high treason against God and his kingdom.

But God also knows us perfectly so he knows what we will choose. That is why he knows what we will do. "*The Lord knows the thoughts of man*" - Psalm 94:11. In science fiction with time travel you often get told that there are thousands of universes all parallel to each other, and each time you make a decision a new universe forms, this one in which you made the decision you made and one in which you took the other decision. Well, if that was really the situation God is big enough to be able to handle all those universes and still work out his plan.

But remember, knowing what we will do does not make God the author of sin. It is still our sin. We must always be careful to make sure we do not make God to be the author of sin in our theology. He allows it for his own purposes which are too deep for us to fathom. But we do know he has a plan to bring his children to glory and that all that happens is in his hands and that should be sufficient for us. And if we deliberately sin then we can't really expect God not to allow us to suffer the consequences of what we have done!

The Baptist Confession of Faith puts it this way (or in paraphrase anyway):

1. God has given the will of man the freedom and power to act upon choice. It is neither forced, nor by any necessity of nature, pre-determined to do good or evil.
2. Man, in his state of innocence, had the freedom and power to do that which was good and



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- well-pleasing to God, but could freely choose whether to follow it or not.
3. Man, by his fall into the state of sin, has completely lost his ability for the will to do any spiritually good. So in the natural state he is altogether adverse to doing that which is good (in the honouring of God sense, not in the natural sense) and is unable by his own strength to convert himself or to prepare himself for conversion.
 4. When God converts a sinner and translates him into a state of grace, he frees him from his natural bondage under sin and by his grace alone enables him freely to will and to do that which is spiritually good. Yet because of his remaining sinfulness, he does not do the good perfectly, nor does he stop completely doing evil.
 5. The will of man is made perfectly and immutably free to good alone in the state of glory only.

I have here a quote which I want to read to you. As I read it I want you to ask yourself whether the sentiments in this quote match what Paul is writing and whether they are true for you as well. This person is talking about the truth as he saw it of God choosing him.

“When I was coming to Christ, I thought I was doing it all myself, and though I sought the Lord earnestly, I had no idea the Lord was seeking me. I do not think the young convert is at first aware of this. I can recall the very day and hour when first I received those truths in my own soul - when they were as John Bunyan says, burnt into my heart as with a hot iron; and I can recollect how I felt that I had grown all of a sudden from a babe into a man - that I had made progress in scriptural knowledge, through having found, once for all, the clue to the truth of God ... I saw that God was at the bottom of it all, and that He was the Author of my faith, and so the whole doctrine of grace opened up to me, and from that doctrine I have not departed to this day, and I desire to make this my constant confession, I ascribe my change wholly to God.” (Charles Spurgeon, *Autobiography: 1, The Early Years*, Banner of Truth, pp. 164-165).

I think this was what Paul was meaning when he wrote *“an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.”*

And what about suffering?

If God is sovereign why does he allow suffering? He allows suffering because Adam chose to sin and because we choose to sin. Adam sinned. Man fell and death entered into the world and nature was corrupted. What we see and experience around us day by day is a creation awaiting the revealing of the sons of glory that it too might be freed of the results of sin. The lion will lie down with the lamb. It is interesting to note that it seems that from the little Genesis tells us man was vegetarian before the Fall. Essentially we are suffering the consequences of our and our forefathers decisions. We cannot blame God for suffering. We might not understand why he allows it always but we do know he knows about it and is allowing it for a reason. Hebrews 12:5-11 shows this clearly. Verse 5 quotes from Proverbs 3:11,12 - *“My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not loose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those whom he loves and punishes everyone he accepts as a son.”* A couple of things we need to make clear:

- Not all our suffering is a result of our sin. Much of what God allows is just the result of the fact that our world is fallen and things happen. Jesus also made this clear in Luke 13:1-5. We all need to repent and follow Jesus.
- Being a Christian does not exempt you from suffering, a teaching sadly which is popular in some sections of the church today. Jesus told us to take up our cross daily and not to be surprised at persecution if we confess that we are his.

Uses:

Use 1: No event happens that God does not know about. This is why Paul can write Romans 8:28 -



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“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him.” We, or other people and events, may be the cause of an event, but God is allowing it for our growth. Jonathan Edwards, a famous American theologian, wrote down at the age of 17 resolutions for his life and two of were – *“Resolved: When things go wrong and difficulties face me, to not complain and grumble, but to remain silent under the hand of the Lord”* and *“Resolved: After afflictions, to inquire what I am the better for them, what good I have got by them and what I might have got by them”*.

Use 2: A corollary of this is that we have no need to fear the future. God has it in his hands. This is something I really struggle with. I fret about things. Yet Jesus said exactly the same thing in Matthew 6 - *“Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life; what you will eat and drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? ... Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?”*.

Use 3: What we choose in life is important. As a Christian when you choose you can choose to either do it your way or God's way. Remember, the two decisions may be the same in their outcome, but the reason for choosing it is what counts. That is why the bible is so full of laws which give principles by which to live your life. We have an inbuilt idea of what is right and wrong but we have no real idea of whether what we think to be right is or not. For some things it might be easy, like murder. Not many people think murder is right. But what about more mundane things like “borrowing” office stationery for use at home. Do things like this matter? This is a question I think we really need to ask ourselves. Does it really matter how we live as Christians? Does it matter whether we obey the traffic laws or not? Many Christians today think it is more important to believe than to obey, or they make a distinction between loving and obeying. But is there? 1 John 2:4 puts it this way - *“The man who says “I know him,” but does not do what he commands is a liar and the truth is not in him”*.

Use 4: Mission is important because God is in control and that's what he has commanded us to do. God has chosen to work through us, independent of whether he “needs” us or not, which is a great privilege indeed. Anyway, given the great things he has done for us, why do we not want to tell other people about him? On the more somber side Ezekiel was told to be the watchman and that if he warned the people their blood would be on their head, but he didn't their blood would be on his head. Jesus put it slightly differently in Luke 12:8:9 - *“I tell you, whoever acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man will also acknowledge him before the angels of God. But he who disowns me before men will be disowned before the angels of God.”*

Today we often think that God is love and therefore he won't actually send anyone to hell. It's just a scary story to encourage us to come to him. The reality is though that the Bible does not see it this way. We know more about hell from the teachings of Jesus than from any other person in the Bible. Yes, God is love, but he is also holy and just. If he was just going to forgive us all at the end of the age then why did he bother to send his Son to come down to Earth and go through so much agony? So we need to tell people the good news. After all *“how can they hear without someone preaching to them?”*

